



27 Years in Support of
Small-scale Fishworkers



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No.44 | December 2013 | ISSN 0973-1156

Yemaya

ICSF'S NEWSLETTER ON GENDER AND FISHERIES


From the Editor

In today's context of a highly unequal, rapidly warming and globalized world, any form of organizing among marginalised communities poses a formidable challenge. This is much more so in the case of women of small-scale fishing communities who find themselves battling not just a capitalist structure that denies them visibility, just wages and basic services, but also the patriarchy of the fisheries sector and of their communities and families. The process of organizing is both challenging and often involves making strategic compromises.

This issue of *Yemaya* highlights three models of organizing, occurring under three different arrangements of political economy. Whether it is the National Articulation of Women (ANP) in Brazil or AKTEA in Europe or the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India, the common thread that runs across all three organizational forms is that of federation. All three models underscore the point that while isolated organizing efforts are important, after a certain stage it is only through federating that organizations can gain maximum political leverage by reaching out to other like-minded organizations and building collective strength based upon a common language, common objectives and common strategies.

The need for sustenance is another common thread that runs across all three models of organizing, highlighting the fact that without support, be it social, political or economic, the process of organizing can be seriously threatened. Thus, while today the European network AKTEA battles a significant resource crisis, the emergence of the ANP can be traced back to the more politically conducive context of Brazil under the Lula government. In India, on the other hand, SEWA seems to have built economic viability into its very structure, generating funds through its diverse spectrum of self-sustaining co-operative activities.

Each of the organizing efforts however also faces its own share of challenges. Some of the challenges may be internal, related to organizational structure and functioning, some external, stemming from the unrestrained free trade and the unregulated 'marketization' that the globalized, neoliberal world economy of today aggressively seeks to promote. In the case of Europe, the commercialization of the fisheries has already led to such a high degree of marginalization of the small-scale fisheries that maintaining the groundswell of support needed to keep fisheries organizations well networked and active is a challenge for networks like AKTEA. In India, on the other hand, for a co-operative-based model of organizing such as SEWA, an important challenge would be to avoid mirroring the private sector model in its functioning. Finally, the experience of the ANP meeting in Brazil suggests that organizational representation might need to be broad-based beyond just the top leadership to ensure participative decision making in federations and networks.

Across the world today, through autonomous organizations, unions, networks and co-operatives, women in the fisheries are organizing for change. Despite the compromises that might have to be made in this highly significant process, as organizations become larger and begin to network for strength, retaining democracy and equality remains a fundamental challenge. 

Advancing the gender agenda

In a meeting of the Brazilian organization, National Articulation of Fisherwomen (ANP), its leaders discuss aspects of their work and mobilization

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Since the mid 1970s the fisherwomen of Brazil have been organizing themselves. This process advanced significantly in the last ten years since the national fishery conferences organized by the government of former President, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, between 2003 and 2006, which gave fisherwomen the opportunity to meet and discuss their situation at state and national levels. This led to the formation of the National Articulation of Fisherwomen (ANP), created in 2006 at the First National Meeting of Fisherwomen, held in Recife, Pernambuco. The organization rapidly gained support in the states, particularly in the northeast region and parts of the north, southeast and southern regions.

In April 2010, ANP leaders helped found the Movement of Artisanal Fishermen and Fisherwomen of Brazil (MPP) in Acupe in Bahia state. Since then, the MPP and the ANP have been active in defending artisanal fisheries and the rights of its communities.

In May 2010, the Second National Meeting of ANP was held in the city of Fortim, Ceará to review the progress made since 2006 (see Yemaya 34). In June 2012, in the third meeting of the ANP held in Cabedelo, Paraíba, whose theme was “Fishing with Health and

Welfare”, the main issues discussed were fisherwomen’s health, the shortcomings of the health system, and the problems that fisherwomen face with social security. It was decided that these issues would form the focus of ANP’s mobilization efforts for the next two years.

National meetings of the ANP are held every two years to analyze the condition of fisherwomen and set priorities for the next two-year period. Co-ordination meetings with state representatives take place twice every year to evaluate the state-level implementation of national-level decisions and to discuss achievements and future directions.

Two co-ordination meetings have been held in 2013—in June and October. The rest of this report describes the second of these two co-ordination meetings.

Aimed at strengthening the organization of artisanal fisherwomen in Brazil and organized with the support of ICSF and the Pastoral Council of Fishworkers (CPP), the meeting, scheduled for 21 to 23 October, was expected to be attended by about 25 leaders from 11 states within Brazil.

The main objectives were to take stock of the progress on the issue of occupational health policies related to fisherwomen, to plan improvements in fisherwomen’s access to welfare rights, and to schedule the next national meeting. Another objective was the sharing of ICSF’s 2010 Gender Agenda programme and the preparatory process behind the *Voluntary Guidelines for securing sustainable small-scale fisheries in the context of food security and poverty eradication* (SSF Guidelines) being developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), with particular reference to women.

When it was held, 11 leaders from eight states, three CPP members, two members of ICSF from Brazil and two researchers of local universities could finally attend the meeting. Many of the leaders reportedly dropped out because this meeting was following too close upon the heels of a mobilization organized by the MPP with other social movements in Brasília, against certain governmental measures, in particular, the privatization of aquatic areas (see Samudra News Alert dated 25 October 2013, <http://www.icsf.net/en/>

NAÍNA PIERRI



ANP Co-ordination meeting at Brazil in October 2013. Two co-ordination meetings have been held in 2013, both in the house of fishworkers in Olinda, Pernambuco

samudra-news-alert/articledetail/50965-25-years-of-cit.html?language=EN).

The first day began with a report of the general situation of the artisanal fisheries in each state. Each leader informed about their participation in the National Campaign for the Regularization of the Fishery Territories—a major national mobilization jointly undertaken by the MPP and ANP since June, 2012 (see SAMUDRA Report No. 62). They also shared their findings and observations on the occupational diseases that fisherwomen in their communities faced.

The ANP has demanded official recognition, particularly by the health and the social

security systems, of the occupational diseases women in the artisanal fisheries face. This demand is vital for disease prevention and mitigation, and would allow fisherwomen to obtain occupational health benefits and accident insurance.

In the last few years, a medical team, together with the CPP conducted epidemiological research in Bahia on the occupational diseases of shellfish collectors and the quality of treatment services available. A special primer on fisherwomen's health was prepared. The ANP used this to conduct discussions with communities and to persuade medical teams from universities in other states to conduct

Lakshmi could probably collect seaweed in her sleep considering that she has been collecting seaweed since she was 10 years old. She is now 52. A very young 52. Lakshmi is a fisherwoman from the Gulf of Mannar region of southern India.

The Gulf of Mannar, a shallow bay on the southeastern coast of India, has over 3000 species including dugongs, sea turtles, and sea grasses. The fishing community along the coast depends on the Gulf's biodiverse waters for its livelihood. In 1986, a part of the Gulf, including 21 islands along the coast, was declared a marine national park, which, under

When Lakshmi was a youngster, there were only about 50 people in the village who collected seaweed. They would hire a *catamaran* and go to the nearby islands of Krusadai and Moyal. The population of the villages kept growing and so did the number of seaweed collectors. Says Lakshmi, "About six years ago, we decided that we must regulate the seaweed collection. The seaweed was not as plentiful as before. Also, we had begun to face a lot of trouble from the forest department with the ban on entry into the national park." After the local politician and police spoke to the villagers about the situation, they decided to begin managing the resource. Today, in her village of Chinnappalam, collection is allowed only for 12 days in a month—six days at full moon and six at new moon. There is also a 45-day total ban on collection. Finally, should a person miss a collection day, no compensatory collection is allowed.

What about the future? Lakshmi says that the women seaweed collectors of her village are looking to see how they can work with the other villages and devise a larger seaweed management plan for the region. "At the recent meeting with scientists and ICSF, some ideas were discussed (rotating collection within the island so that each area is harvested only once in five months and so on). Currently only my village is following these self-imposed rules. We have to talk to all the women collectors across the region and see what will work."

"My daughter is married and lives elsewhere," she adds "so there is no one after me in my house to continue this practice, but there are other youngsters for whom we want to leave behind a legacy of sustainable seaweed use." ■

PROFILE

A very young 52!

Seaweed collector, Lakshmi, wants to leave behind a legacy of sustainable seaweed collection

By **Sumana Narayanan** (sumananarayanan@gmail.com), Programme Associate, ICSF

Indian law, means a no-take zone. Since the islands have been used by the fishing community for generations, seaweed collection and other livelihood activities continued for years even after the area fell under protection. It was only in the year 2000 that the regulations began to be seriously implemented.

Following the example of her mother, her sister and other women in the community, as a young girl Lakshmi began to go to the islands nearby to collect seaweed, learning to swim by watching the elders. Collecting seaweed was tough with no goggles, flippers or protective gear. "We used to just reach out, grope about and collect seaweed with our bare hands," says Lakshmi. "By the time we reached home, our hands would be cut up by corals. Imagine cooking or eating after this! It was very painful and the spices would make the cuts burn!"

The ANP has demanded official recognition of all the occupational diseases women in the artisanal fisheries face.

similar research. How to use the primer and lobby government officials had been discussed in the ANP co-ordination meeting in June 2013. The progress made on these fronts was now reported.

On the second day, the group planned further activities and reviewed the progress made. The most important advance reported was a meeting with the Health Ministry on 9 September in Brasilia. Members of the ANP, the CPP and some of the doctors who had been involved in preparation of the primer made a presentation to Health Ministry officials on the health situation of fisherwomen and fishermen, following which the Ministry had agreed to undertake an extensive epidemiological study research across 11 states, based on the Bahia study. The Ministry had also agreed to introduce fishers' health-related content into professional health courses.

Also on the second day, Náina Pierri, member of ICSF from Brazil made a presentation on ICSF's Gender Agenda explaining how it had been formulated and how it related to women's struggles in fisheries in Brazil. In another presentation, ICSF member Beatriz Mesquita, talked about the process of drafting the SSF Guidelines, emphasizing the related consultation that was held in Brazil and explaining how the Guidelines address the question of women. The leaders present at the meeting showed a high level of interest in both issues. In our opinion, over the last few years, and to a great extent due to ICSF's facilitation,

these movements have improved their understanding of struggles taking place at the international level in defense of artisanal fisheries and gender justice.

The last session was devoted to scheduling the next meetings, in particular the Fourth National Meeting of the ANP to be held from 25-29 August, 2014 in Paraná state and expected to be attended by about 50 leaders and supporters. The main goal of the meeting would be to evaluate the evolution of the ANP since its formation, and redefine its agenda and priorities. Towards this end, there would be one preparatory co-ordination meeting from 15-16 March 2014, and a set of state level meetings. The questions proposed to be discussed are: What have been the main achievements of fisherwomen in the last ten years? Currently, what are the main problems being faced? What are ANP's main demands for the coming years? And finally, what must be prioritized in order to strengthen fisherwomen's organizations?

Following a presentation of accounts and an evaluation of the meeting, a simple closing ceremony was held, where the participants sang a beautiful song about their struggle. In our view, despite the fact that many were unable to attend, a lot was achieved in the meeting. It contributed ably towards strengthening both the organization of fisherwomen in Brazil as well as the struggle of the artisanal fishing communities—a struggle in which women are at the forefront, demanding their right to a dignified life. ■

Empowering women online

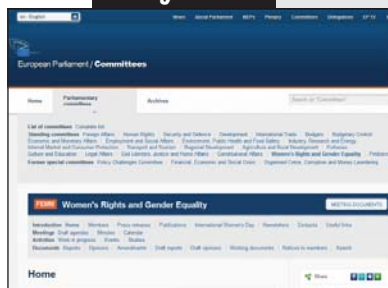
FEMM is a European Union (EU) Committee dedicated to women's rights and gender equality. The FEMM page online is a channel for sharing information and for the promotion of the Committee's mandate and achievements. According to the website, despite many successes in empowering women, numerous issues still exist in all areas of life: social, cultural, political and economic, where women are not equally treated.

Some of the areas of particular concern for the Committee are the pay gap, female poverty, women's underrepresentation in decision making, trafficking and violence against women and children (<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/femm/home.html#menuzone>).

The FEMM website is a repository of information on the full range of activities that the Committee undertakes. The site has recently been updated with a draft report on specific actions in the common fisheries policy (CFP) for developing the role of women: www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=COMPARL&mode=XML&language=EN&reference=PE519.712

The working of the Committee, its members, its publications and the various draft reports that the Committee has authored are among some of the offerings available. There is also a multi-media component, where Committee proceedings can be seen live: www.europarl.europa.eu/ep-live/en/committees/video?event=20131127-1000-COMMITTEE-PECH-FEMM ■

What's New, Webby?



By **Ramya Rajagopalan**
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Hanging in the balance

Dwindling financial and managerial resources are threatening the existence of fisheries networks like AKTEA that have played an invaluable role in making visible women's contributions to European fisheries

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Established in 2006, AKTEA is the European network of women's organizations in fisheries. The women's organizations involved with the network are varied: some assist their fisher spouses; some gather shellfish; others mend nets. European fisherwomen's organizations, through their sustained work, have become important players in the fishing industry and have been able to influence policies linked to the sector.

Fisherwomen in Europe today are advocates of the social aspects of the fisheries, playing an important role in resource management. Some of them are members of Regional Advisory Councils, advising the European Commission on fisheries matters. The authorities often consider women to be more open-minded than men in discussions on critical issues concerning the fisheries. But today it is also the case that after 20 years of activity, these organizations are facing severe difficulties. Women's organizations in Europe are run on a voluntary basis, a mode of functioning that does not

enable them to build long-term projects. They require financial and managerial support from the authorities to contribute more fully towards the development of sustainable fisheries policies. Without such support these organizations will cease to exist.

Today, like other organizations in the sector, AKTEA faces a host of difficulties. The future of AKTEA was, therefore, the core agenda of its annual general meeting held on the 15 October 2013 in Brussels. The network is finding it more and more difficult to carry out its regular activities. For the last three years, it neither held its annual meeting nor published its bi-annual newsletter. Communication between members, always a challenge due to the diversity of languages spoken within Europe, now represents a significant expense.

During the annual meeting participants were asked to respond to the two following questions: "Do we still need the network, and if yes, for what?"

From the general response it was clear that for its members, the network must continue its activities: first, because AKTEA is the only forum where fisherwomen from different countries can share their experiences; and second, because the network plays an important role in the promotion and visibility of women's contributions to the fisheries at the European Union (EU) level.

The AKTEA network is a valuable source of information about EU institutions and

ANNIE CASTALDO



The annual general meeting of AKTEA was held on the 15 October 2013 in Brussels. The AKTEA network is a valuable source of information about EU institutions and policies for its members

Fisherwomen's organizations require financial and managerial support from the authorities to contribute more fully towards the development of sustainable fisheries policies.

policies for its members. For these reasons, the constituent women's organizations decided to issue a statement addressed jointly to the EU decisionmakers, Commission and Parliament explaining AKTEA's role and importance for women in fisheries, and seeking funding to continue the network. Convincing European decisionmakers of the significance of the network is a necessary precondition for financial support from EU institutions. The statement would argue that AKTEA contributes to the building of the EU by offering a space where women, as European citizens, learn about other member States and about Europe.

The implementation of European policies concerning gender equality has opened the doors to EU structural funds for women. The current European Fisheries Funds (EFF) and the future Fund for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs have started paying more attention to women's initiatives at the level of both the fisheries enterprise and collective action. At the enterprise level, women can apply for funds to support diversification of their activities; at the collective level, funds are available for networking. In practice, however, only a few countries pay attention to gender equality measures introduced by the EFF, and women's initiatives funded by the structural funds are few. This lack of attention forces fisherwomen's organizations to question their role, existence and acceptance in the public space.

The actions to implement the European strategy for equality between women and

men for the period 2010-2015 in the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions (COM 2010 491, SEC 2010-1080) also refer to women in fisheries. A proposed action is to "support MS (Member States) in promoting gender equality in the EFF programmes by drawing lessons from the mid-term evaluation" and the creation "of a pan-European network of women active in the fisheries sector and in coastal regions to improve the visibility of women in this sector and establish a platform for the exchange of best practices". Both these proposed actions were claimed by the AKTEA network during the consultation process for the European roadmap of equality. However, despite these proposals being endorsed by the European Commissioner responsible for the fisheries during a public hearing at the 2010 fisheries commission of the European Parliament, fisherwomen's organizations are still waiting. This long wait will negatively impact not only AKTEA, but also the national level organizations that have helped improve women's rights within the industry and formulate socially-informed fisheries policies.

Fisherwomen would like to believe that this last request for financial support will find a better echo among the authorities than their previous appeals have. The bitter truth is that without adequate support the majority of fishworker organizations will soon disappear. ■

OCEANIA

AUSTRALIA

Coping with change

Recent research in an indigenous coastal community in Australia's Northern Territory reveals women's strong preference for climate change adaptation and aquaculture development

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Off the coast of northern Australia lies the island of South Goulburn, home to the small indigenous coastal community of Waruwi. English is not usually the first language spoken here; in fact the islanders may speak two, three or more different Aboriginal languages, most commonly Maung. Particularly in the dry season, there is a high degree of mobility to and from other regions, commonly to the mainland of Arnhem Land, and the city of

Darwin, 280 km to the southwest, which is connected to the island by a 'mail plane'. The Waruwi community has always depended upon marine resources and engaged in subsistence harvesting activities but today the community faces an increasingly uncertain future because of the deleterious impacts of climate change.

As part of our research on climate change, in 2012-2013, we carried out a series of interviews and workshops with the women of the Waruwi community to improve understandings of dependency on marine resources, perspectives on climate change, and aquaculture as a means towards adapting to climate change.

A warming planet would undermine the food security of the Waruwi community due to a number of interlinked reasons. First, a portion of the community's customary

diet or 'bush foods' are fished, hunted and gathered from coastal ecosystems threatened by climate change. Second, if the balance of these coastal ecosystems is upended, then dependence on external access (for delivery of expensive supplementary food and other resources and services) may increase to compensate for locally sourced food shortages. Meanwhile dependence on external access may be compromised if access to the island is obstructed by the evermore frequent, unpredictable and severe weather events expected from future climate change.

In our research we used a number of participatory and visual techniques—diagramming, board games, videos and iBooks. We focused mainly on interviewing and talking to the women, although some men were also included to ensure that we weren't missing out on any important information.

Indigenous communities in northern Australia maintain intricate and complex connections with various aspects of the environment. Harvesting marine resources is important in providing fresh food for families and extended kin groups; promoting physical exercise and emotional and mental health; and maintenance and transfer of customary knowledge. An awareness of customary knowledge, particularly relating to the marine ecosystems, is an integral part of the construction of the islander's self and identity.

All the people we spoke to practiced harvesting to different degrees but they also regularly bought large proportions of food from the local store that imports commonly refined (and expensive) foods. There was variation in the amount and frequency of harvesting among different families, genders, age groups and seasons. Harvesting was

believed to be practiced much less today than 50 years ago, but there was still a strong desire that many expressed for greater opportunity to harvest more. Lack of transport, poor health and mobility, and family and work commitments were often cited as the chief barriers to harvesting.

The people we met had a limited understanding of the concepts associated with climate change, such as global warming and greenhouse gases. Many thought climate change was a phenomenon occurring only elsewhere in the world. However, in deeper conversations, many reported observing unusual and inexplicable patterns of environmental change—beach erosion, sea level rise, new weather patterns, and changes in distribution, abundance and taste of some plant and animal species. Many, particularly those who were older, expressed concern both at these changes and the fact that the community was moving away from certain customary practices and losing its local knowledge. The unpredictability of the environment was worrying and potentially disempowering to many people.

Despite the newness of the issues, we found that when discussions got underway and were followed up by workshops and later interviews, people could easily grasp the idea that climate change was resulting from human impacts on the environment. It fitted well with their own view of the environment as highly interconnected, a dynamic web of components involving humans and the broader world. People wanted to know more about the reasons for climate change and how other communities were dealing with it.

In terms of future adaptation, most people emphasized community capacity building

There was a strong preference for low maintenance aquaculture carried out in a way that is respectful to culture and primarily directed by the community.



Milestones

By **Ramya Rajagopalan**
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A landmark resolution

The United Nations (UN) has passed a landmark resolution in support of women's rights defenders, appealing to all states to publicly condemn violence against women and give activists free access to UN bodies.

African nations, the Vatican, Iran, Russia, China and conservative Muslim States had sought to weaken the resolution, which calls on all States to publicly condemn violence against women human rights defenders, amend legislation that hinders them and give activists free access to UN bodies. Finally, in order to get consensus, the Norwegian-led coalition responsible for the draft of the resolution had to delete language that condemned "all forms of violence against women".

Geir Sjoberg, the Norwegian government's lead negotiator on the resolution, was quoted as saying: "The international community has sent a clear message. It's unacceptable to criminalize, stigmatize or curtail women's human rights defenders". He added that the key aim now would be to make sure governments are held to commitments made in the text.

The campaign for women's rights defenders had received a huge boost in recent months by the likes of Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani teenager shot in the head by the Taliban for her battle for girls' education, and Denis Mukwege, the Democratic Republic of Congo doctor briefly forced into exile for his work in helping rape victims. **■**



The Warruwi community has always depended upon marine resources and engaged in subsistence harvesting activities. Woman collecting oysters in Warruwi coastal area

and using customary knowledge. Many were also open to the idea of incorporating western scientific knowledge, where appropriate, into management and planning. Independence, empowerment and autonomy were ideas that found frequent echo in the conversations. Many people felt that greater communication with the community, more education among adults and at the school, and the involvement of the community in decision-making processes were vital for adaptation. Networking with coastal communities dealing with climate change in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region was also suggested. People were not aware of the adaptation policies being developed by the Territory and Federal Governments, and many expressed a strong desire to be involved in the local decision-making around adaptation.

In the research discussions, participants of different ages seemed to have strong relationships with their past and current selves but less of an emotional relationship with their 'future' selves. Their views of the future contrasted sharply with typically Western viewpoints. The Western notion of time is usually linear—one in which time travels uni-directionally in a bounded matrix of space and time, open to deliberate human intervention. In contrast, people from Warruwi, like many other indigenous peoples, have a cyclical notion of time. This is revealed, for instance, in indigenous story telling which, as some researchers point out, tends to be directed towards the origins of creation—people come from the earth and go back to the earth at death. This difference in perspective has significant implications for the way climate change adaptation policy

is discussed and developed between policy makers, indigenous local people and other stakeholders.

As a viable adaptation strategy, the women in Warruwi are very open to the development of aquaculture in the region, especially to farm local species including oysters, sea cucumbers and giant clams. We therefore tried to link our research to the Northern Territory (NT) government strategy aimed at development of community-based low-tech aquaculture on Goulburn Island.

There was however limited understanding of the logistics and scale involved in commercial aquaculture, with a strong preference for low intensive aquaculture, respectful of culture and directed by the community, with some support from NT Fisheries and other scientists. Many expressed faith in the newly established Yagbani Aboriginal Corporation on decision making related to aquaculture and adaptation. They also expressed confidence in the advice and abilities of fisheries scientists. However, it was clear that communication between the community and fisheries scientists, currently carrying out trials, needs to be improved. In fact, for aquaculture to succeed as a viable adaptation strategy, external stakeholders would have to respect local customs and worldviews, with adequate attention paid to developing communication, trust, genuine support, engagement and involvement of the community in decision-making.

Because there are no 'off-the-shelf' designs of aquaculture systems for remote NT indigenous communities under climate change uncertainty, a project to support aquaculture development should be based on principles that draw from 'adaptive management' and best-bet ideas for culturing marine species and enterprise management. Furthermore, the approach must also be highly flexible.

The use of carefully designed visioning exercises with all stakeholders to ensure shared cultural framings for future plans and understanding is recommended. The engagement of knowledge brokers, including translators to work between the community and other stakeholders may also be important to help make key concepts of climate, adaptation, aquaculture and planning more easily understandable and accessible. New partnerships would need to be forged. Networks among various indigenous groups and stakeholders may help provide support, encourage learning among groups and lead to new ways of integrating different ways of viewing, and being in, the world. ■

Co-operation is the solution

A visit to SEWA, India's oldest and largest women's co-operative movement, spanning diverse sectors from vending and retail to banking and insurance, turns out to be an eye-opener for Mumbai's women fishworkers

By **Shuddhawati S Peke**
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For generations, women fishworkers in the state of Maharashtra in India's western coast have sold fish. Mumbai, the capital of Maharashtra and India's economic capital, has 53 municipal fish markets and approximately 70 street fish markets; in addition, countless vendors move door to door throughout the city and its suburbs selling fish. According to the 2010 marine census, the state has the largest number of women fishworkers in India. Today, for the first time, these women are getting organized.

Mumbai's women fishworkers have historically been part of a larger fishworkers' union, the Maharashtra Macchimar Kruti Samittee (MMKS), affiliated to the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF) but their issues have never been centrally represented by the union. To correct this serious imbalance, Mumbai's women fishworkers have today decided to build their own organization—a space where their concerns may be voiced,

and properly represented in the policies and decision making process for governing the fisheries sector.

To catalyze the organizing process, Nalini Nayak, a member of ICSF and one of the founder members of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in the state of Kerala, suggested an exposure visit to SEWA in Ahmedabad in the neighbouring Gujarat state. SEWA is the oldest and largest women's union in the labour history of India. Born out of a historic struggle in 1972 by Ahmedabad's women textile mill workers, under the leadership of Elaben Bhatt, a Gandhian activist and woman lawyer, SEWA today spans 14 states and has a membership of over 10,00,000 self-employed women. Its main objective is to bring visibility to women workers in the informal sector. The organization pursues a two-pronged strategy of struggle and constructive work, organizing self-employed women in unions and co-operatives.

A team of seven, comprising three women from MMKS, Mumbai, the author representing ICSF from Mumbai, and three individuals from Gujarat, visited SEWA in September 2013. The four-day trip was spent visiting co-operatives of self-employed women in a range of sectors: insurance, banking, health,

SHUDDHAWATI PEKE / ICSF



SEWA has offered a composite insurance product known as VimoSEWA (meaning SEWA insurance) for members and their families. Annual general meeting of members of VimoSEWA

In a patriarchal society like India, an all-women operation is a challenge to the status quo.

dairy, fisheries, agriculture (both production and vending), catering, cleaning, vegetable vending, health, training as well as services such as child care.

On the first day, the team was invited to attend the fourth Annual General Body meeting of VimoSEWA, a first of its kind national insurance co-operative that emerged out of the need for social security for women in the informal economy. While earlier SEWA relied on insurance for its members through the government's Life Insurance Corporation, in 2009, VimoSEWA was formed to provide micro-insurance to poor self-employed women and their families. The meeting highlighted the difficulties of getting women with meagre incomes to accept the importance of insurance and pay premiums regularly. A woman from the local area, referred as the *veemasathi*, helps educate women on insurance and helps with claims and reimbursements. Out of the 4420 claims VimoSEWA settled in 2012, only 15 per cent were rejected. The insurance portfolio covers a range of options ranging from Rs 3000 (USD 49) to Rs 25000 (USD 409.5) of insurance cover for life, health, accidental death or housing damage depending on premium and tenure. Several large insurance companies, such as the Life Insurance Corporation and Larsen and Toubro, with whom VimoSEWA has tied up for insurance provisioning, were present at the Annual General Body, and it was well said by Miraiben, Chairperson of VimoSEWA, that "when we have strength these companies reach out to vulnerable groups like ours; our collective strength, lies in our power to negotiate."

The next halt for the team was a fish market. Chamanpura Fish Market, one of the city's three such markets, sells mostly inland fish. SEWA, along with women fishworkers in Ahmedabad, struggled hard to acquire corporation land for the fish market. Earlier women vendors would vend their fish on the roadside. Now they have a place under the bridge, for which they pay a small rent to the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation. The fish vendors have their own co-operative named Shree Matsyagandha Womens' SEWA Co-operative Society Limited. It provides place to store unsold fish, a weighing scale and office space.

Suruchiben, a worker from SEWA, who works with women engaged in fishing and agriculture, introduced the visitors to SEWA's

basic model. Once a woman gets attached to a co-operative related to her business or to a SEWA union, she automatically gets connected with SEWA's other services. These include insurance through VimoSEWA, and credit, saving and investment through the SEWA bank. She also gets attached to the co-operative federation at the state level, and through it, can avail of capacity building and other training services from time to time. A grassroots worker from SEWA helps each group of women workers to come together and learn 'how to do' their business through co-operation—how to register a co-operative, connect to the rest of SEWA and develop leadership.

The next day, the team headed off to Vekeraia gam in Nal Sarovar—a region famous for a huge lake, marshlands and for bird sanctuary. The fisherfolk here—mostly Muslims—besides fishing, act as tourist guides. While men in the area handle both fishing and marketing, a women's fisheries co-operative helped them build a network with inland markets. Though the co-operative members are women, the management is by men, chosen by union workers from each village. Women help prepare for fishing trips, manage household chores, and participate in the co-operative. The co-operative leaders buy the fish catch for the day and transport it to the collection office in Ahmedabad from where it gets distributed to markets like Chamanpura. Unlike in Mumbai where women fishworkers have to go to landing centres to buy fish, women vendors in Chamanpura place orders that are then sent to their market.

Next the team visited a co-operative of agricultural women workers. SEWA helped this co-operative lease barren land from the government for a period of 20 years, arranging for training through agricultural institutions. The once-barren area is today an organic farm. Its produce, consisting of fruits and vegetables, is transported to the city by van and fetches a premium price. An additional attraction offered is ecotourism—the co-operative organizes pickup facilities from the city, and tourists are treated to nutritious food, sight-seeing, and a traditional reception and send-off.

While the co-operative was subjected to ridicule from the *panchayat* (village-level governing body) and difficulties such as the presence of wild animals on the farm,

they gained strength from SEWA's constant support. And as the farmland became productive, there were attempts to snatch the land away from them, which again SEWA helped them resist.

A similar story may be heard in Pethapur, where, in a male dominated world of milk marketing, SEWA runs its milk co-operative. The milk that women bring in is measured for quantity and fat content. All transactions are maintained on both computer and physical register. The book keeping is orderly and easily accessible to the members. The women, some only semi-literate, successfully handle the computer. In a patriarchal society like India, an all-women operation is a challenge to the status quo and SEWA has had to struggle at every step.

The team also visited the Agriculture Producer's Marketing Committee (APMC) Market, a wholesale vegetable market, started by two women who dared to enter the wholesale field, until then completely controlled by men. Despite initial opposition and derision, today they run a shop managed by SEWA which provides vegetables to retail women vendors in the area. SEWA has in fact built a network of successful agricultural co-operatives for poor women in a context where agricultural co-operatives are generally controlled by big farmers and traders.

The SEWA Bank is another unique initiative started in 1974 by Elaben Bhatt promoting saving among poor women, and providing credit, insurance coverage and pension schemes. With seven branches today in predominantly working class localities in Ahmedabad, it was started by 4000 women, each contributing ten rupees (USD 0.16). Currently, it has 96,921 shareholders and 448,434 members. Savings, loan and investment products are developed according to life cycle needs of women. It offers a scheme called "Kishori Gold" to provide for a daughter's marriage; a scheme for housing loans; and for micro pension schemes. The bank also has "bank *sathis*" (bank volunteers), financial literacy programmes and business counselling cells to handhold women in their journey towards financial self-dependence.

SEWA is a strong force in the labour movement in India today. Many government policies have been influenced by its advocacy efforts—the formulation of the national street vendor's policy; and the reduction in general bank interest rates for women co-operatives from 9 to 16 per cent to 4 per cent are examples.

The visit to SEWA was a source of inspiration to us. For women fish vendors back home in Mumbai, keen to build a strong union, and struggling with government bodies and mainstream fisheries, there is still long way to go. We need strong women's co-operatives (because until now fisheries co-operatives have only served the needs of fishermen), better social security, access to credit and savings. SEWA's splendid results have borne fruit in 40 years. For Mumbai's women fishworkers this is just the beginning of a bright, hopeful future. ■

Interview of Kulsuma Begum, 35, a dry-fish worker from Kutubdia Para, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

By Moqbul Ahmed (moqbul@coastbd.org),
COAST, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Can you describe the work that you do?

I am a dry-fish worker and my work consists of drying and processing fish at Nazirartek in Cox's Bazar.

What are some of the problems that you and other women who are in this line of work face?

We face many problems. The first problem is that our daily wages are very low—only about 100 to 150 taka (US\$1.5 to US\$2) per day; this despite the fact that we put in long hours of work from six in the morning until seven at night. There are no proper toilets for our use and more than a hundred women workers are forced to use an open toilet, on top of which there is no soap and not enough water to clean up with. Our lunchtime is really short and we hardly get enough time to eat. There is no shed for us to work in and so we are forced to work in the open air, exposed to the heat and dust. And finally, the dry-fish unit owner under whom we work uses abusive language towards us the whole time.

Has any women's association been formed to take up the issues of dry-fish workers?

No.

What changes would you want in your working conditions? What benefits should the government provide?

We are daily wage workers. Our wages are low and working hours are very long. We want our wages increased. We want decent toilet facilities provided to us as well as water and soap for our use. Food is another issue. We have to start from our homes very early at dawn so as to reach the workplace by 6 am. Very often the packed food we carry with us from home goes bad by lunchtime and has to be thrown away. Food is simply not available anywhere near our place of work. This is a big problem. We are demanding that the unit owner provides a cooked meal for us at lunchtime. ■

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DOCUMENTARIES

WAWATA TOPU—Mermaids of Timor-Leste (English: 33mins)

A film by David Palazón & Enrique Alonso

This review is by
Nilanjana Biswas
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Researcher

The film begins with stunning underwater visuals: shoals of fish darting in and out of coral reefs, as if dancing to the haunting chant-like singing that forms the film's opening score while clownfish squirm amidst fingers of swaying white anemone. And then, suddenly and breathtakingly, there are women there, surrounded by fish and swinging webs of light, holding what appear to be long sticks in their hands and dance-walking through the blue waters.


The *wawata topu*, described as the 'mermaids' of Timor-Leste in the film's title, are the women divers of Adara in West Atauro in Timor-Leste. As the film follows some of the women divers, such as 18-year old Sara or 15-year old Angelita while they go about their daily work, we learn that the community survives on fishing and subsistence farming. Corn is the staple, which the women hand-pound into meal in large wooden mortars. Vegetables and fruit are grown, and pigs and chickens reared in the backyard while the forest is a perennial source of sustenance, providing villagers with edible leaves and other foods. The other vital source of sustenance is the sea.

Both the men and the women of the community go fishing in small, artisanal boats, casting nets and spearing fish. The long sticks of the opening shots turn out to be spear guns used in the course of daily fishing and by divers who walk the seafloor and swim the reefs, spear gun in hand, eyes covered by goggles, looking for fish and octopi. Men, women and children all go diving, learning the skill as a part of growing up, almost just like they learnt to walk.

The old order is however changing. Ageing couples eagerly looking to their children to relieve them from the rigours of hard labour

find themselves facing a harsh reality. Their children, unlike themselves, have been schooled, and the school certificate is, more often than not, a one-way ticket to jobs and opportunities in far away cities. Other contradictory discourses shape the lives of the *wawata topu*. The expectations around the custom of *barlake*, a form of bride-price, are in a state of flux. Neither wanting to lose a pair of precious labouring hands, the bride's family and the groom's, each expects the newlyweds to move in with them after the *barlake* settlement. The power relation between men and women is also changing under the pressure of modernity. The men, unhampered by domestic duties, are able to catch the larger, more expensive varieties of fish leaving a diminished catch for the women to sell in far-off markets.

As the filmmakers describe it, the film is an ethnographic portrait that makes visible the critical contribution of women to the household economies and the fishing community at large. The film's strength is that without relying on voiceover or commentary, through the use of only interviews and extremely well-shot visuals, it manages to convey the very real sense of a community caught in the cusp of change. It may be set in a remote equatorial island village but the film speaks of the universal dilemmas that accompany the condition of modernity, and raises questions about the survival and future of small-scale fishing communities everywhere.

For details, visit: <https://www.facebook.com/wawatatopu> 



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Writers and potential contributors to YEMAYA, please note that write-ups should be brief, about 500 words. They could deal with issues that are of direct relevance to women and men of fishing communities. They could also focus on recent research or on meetings and workshops that have raised gender issues in fisheries. Also welcome are life stories of women

and men of fishing communities working towards a sustainable fishery or for a recognition of their work within the fishery. Please also include a one-line biographical note on the writer.

Please do send us comments and suggestions to make the newsletter more relevant. We look forward to hearing from you and to receiving regular write-ups for the newsletter.